The Role of Theory in Research on Social Work Practice

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"The gap between theory and practice is a wide one"
Agatha Christie (1989, p. 173)

In 1967, when I was 14 years old, Briar (1967) labeled the state of affairs with respect to research on social casework as a "crisis," in part because our field lacked evidence of the effectiveness of social work services. In the mid-1970s, shortly after I graduated from high school, Joel Fischer (1973a, 1973b, 1976) published articles and a book effectively documenting Briar's assertion that the field lacked a strong evidentiary basis for service. Two decades after Fischer's assessments, after I had become a tenured professor, the National Institute on Mental Health commissioned a distinguished panel of social workers to systematically review the state of affairs with respect to social work research. What was the conclusion of this group? "The Task Force has concluded that there is today a crisis in social work research" (Austin, 1991, p. 11). There is a phrase to describe a crisis which has persisted for longer than one's professional life. It is called business as usual! Perhaps it is time to stop sounding the alarm, and to begin to put out the fire.

Why has this crisis come about, and why does it persist? Enola Proctor and her colleagues (Proctor, Rosen, & Staudt, 1999) at Washington University have recently completed a comprehensive survey of articles published in 13 major social work journals between the years 1993 and 1997. Of the 1,849 articles published, only 863 (47%) could be classified as empirical research. Of these 863, 423 (49%) were explanatory studies (those which tested a theory aimed at explaining a phenomena), 314 (36%) were descriptive reports, and 126 (15%) some type of outcome study. Now, a profession with 126 outcome studies published in a five year period sounds to be in pretty good shape, with respect to establishing an empirical foundation of effectiveness. However, when Proctor et al. (1999) eliminated those with poorly replicable interventions, and unreliable or invalid outcome measures, only 53 studies remained, about 3% of the total numbers of articles published! And of course, many of these had negative findings. A practitioner seeking guidance about potentially effective ways to help clients would have to read over 30 articles to find one that is a useful outcome study. There is a reason why social work practitioners rarely read our professional journals. They are right not to do so!

The problem of descriptive and explanatory studies dominating our research efforts does not seem limited to journal articles. Harrison and Thyer (1988) examined the abstracts of all social work dissertations published between July of 1984 and June of 1985. Of the 187 dissertations, 109 related to direct practice, 57 pertained to administration, policy, or organizational analysis, 16 dealt with professional matters, and 5 dealt with historical studies. Of those dealing with practice, 93 were either exploratory, descriptive, process, or nonexperimental case studies. Only 16 out of 187 dissertations (8.6%) were either experimental or quasi-experimental outcome studies on practice.

The conspicuous absence of well-crafted outcome studies on social work practice has lead to a growing chorus of voices calling for an expansion of such research investigations, which may be given the general term of "services research" or "intervention research." Harrison and Thyer (1988) provide one description of services research:

> "Such studies test the efficacy of social work interventions, validate assessment methods for use in social work practice, and/or determine the effective components of a social work treatment program...We would also argue...that the most valuable scientific and professional contribution to the knowledge base of social work practice would be for students to conduct experimental and quasi-experimental outcome studies which test social work interventions" (p. 108)

These authors further suggested:

> "We propose a national research agenda for doctoral programs that have direct practice or clinical specializations: That faculty actively encourage students to conduct outcome research for their doctoral dissertations...Students might test the efficacy of an innovative social work treatment, replicate a social work treatment, which has previously been shown to be efficacious, in a new setting, with a new psychosocial problem, or with a new client/system; they might develop and validate an assessment method for social work practice; or they might dismantle studies which isolate the critical ingredients of an effective social work treatment" (p. 110, italics in original)

> "...social work's primary mission is to help people, and we believe that a useful method to achieve this mission is to encourage doctoral students to develop and test effective interventions. What could be closer to the context of practice than empirically substantiated knowledge regarding techniques that assist our clients in solving important problems in their lives." (p. 113)

While this call for a national research agenda to focus doctoral training on services research remains (regrettably) an unfulfilled aspiration, there is increasing recognition that explicit doctoral training in services research is crucial for the development of the profession and to make research have greater utility for practice. For example, David Austin's recent (1998) Report on progress in the development of research resources in social work contains the following recommendations:

> "Of highest priority are strategies for the continued development of research resources in mental health and for the development of research-

based, practice-relevant knowledge for use in services dealing with children and their families".....(p. 6)

"Research on actual service interventions is the critical element in connecting research to the knowledge base used by professional practitioners" (p. 17)

"Research on the effectiveness of service interventions is a major form of representation of the profession to the larger society. **The most important issue for the immediate future is to bring the practice effectiveness concerns of social work practitioners together with the resources represented by social work researchers** " (p. 27, bold in original)

"...the issue is now one of developing investigations of social work intervention initiatives, studies that go beyond descriptive and explanatory research..." (Austin, 1998, p. 43)

David Austin is not alone in this view. As a result of her analysis of the state of the art in social work research published in our discipline's journals, Proctor said:

"We need to establish a research agenda for social work...And intervention studies must be high in priority to such an agenda" (Proctor, 1998, p. 19) and

and Dr. Anne Fortune, Editor of Social Work Research finds that:

"The lack of attention to research on intervention despite decades of lip service is disturbing. Practice is the raison d'etre of social work. The purpose of social work is intervention. Social workers do not stop after studying a phenomenon, but do something about it: prevent ill health, change policy, influence organizations, assist families, or teach individuals coping skills. Why, then, do so many social work researchers stop with studying a phenomenon (descriptive research) rather than looking at what social workers do and its effects?" (Fortune, 1999, p. 2)

Kathleen Ell (1996), former Director of the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, has made the following observations:

"Studies are needed on the effectiveness of psychosocial intervention, including interventions previously tested under ideal controlled circumstances, in real-world health care systems. This growing area of research affords social work opportunities to conduct research on actual programs and services (p. 587)...Intervention research is costly and time-

consuming. Social work is also disadvantaged in that it has yet to fully develop natural practice-research partnerships between researchers and service-providers...the collective commitment of the profession is needed to successfully address the current gaps in research on social work interventions" (p. 589)

Why is so little research on the outcomes of social work practice being conducted? Why does this crisis continue? One factor identified by Proctor et al. (1999) is the overwhelming dominance of descriptive and explanatory (i.e. theory-testing) studies being conducted by social work researchers. Fully 49% of the research articles published in social work involved research aimed at explaining psychosocial phenomena via testing some theory. Only 3% reported credible outcome studies of the results of social work practice. According to Proctor et al. (1999), blame lies at the feet of social work academics:

"Many people in social work have been socialized into the researcher's role-directly by teachers and indirectly through textbooks, in the orientation and tradition of the social sciences. Such socialization may lead to the unwitting adoption of social science's emphasis on research for descriptive and explanatory purposes as a sufficient focus for research in social work." (p. 13)

Proctor et al. then go on to specifically name the villain: **THEORY!** Many research texts claim that the goal of scientific research is theory-building, and that anything less than this is a weak contribution to knowledge building. Is this an exaggerated claim? Take a look at what Allen Rubin has to say about the role of theory in social work research. Dr. Rubin is the current President of the prestigious organization, The Society for Social Work and Research, and author of one of social work's best selling research textbooks:

"...some studies make no use of theory at all....Of course, conducting such atheoretical studies that have little or no relevance outside of their pragmatic purposes for a particular agency does little to build social work knowledge. Consequently, some do not call such studies "scientific research", preferring instead to label them with terms like "administrative data gathering". (Rubin & Babbie, 1997, p. 55, italics added)

A best-selling guidebook on completing dissertation research (Rudestam & Newton, 1992) contains the following assertions:

"Many students who are attracted to their field of interest out of an applied concern are apprehensive about making the leap from application to theory that is an indispensable part of the research enterprise (pp. 3-4)...they draw

> upon theory and experience to help select a particular intervention for a particular client problem or moment in therapy (p. 4)...Theory is the language that allows us to move from observation to observation and make sense of similarities and differences. Without placing the study in such a context, the proposed study has a 'so what' quality" ...a study may be primarily worthwhile for its practical applications..but a purely applied study may not be acceptable as a dissertation (p. 6, italics added).

These quotes stressing the crucial nature of making a contribution to theory appear in the very first pages of this influential book, and similar sentiments echo throughout the text. Kerlinger's comprehensive research textbook, one used in many social work doctoral programs, proclaims that "The basic purpose of scientific research is theory." (1977, p. 5). Similarly, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE, 1992) maintains that scholarly inquiry for social workers should include the "formulation of professionally relevant and theoretically productive research questions and hypotheses" (p. 12).

The message is clear, concise, and unambiguous, and our social work doctoral programs have heeded this advice. Table 1 depicts statements taken from a number of guidelines for the design and conduct of doctoral dissertations recently mailed to me by doctoral programs in social work.

Table 1

Selected Social Work Doctoral Program Standards About Designing Dissertations.

"A theoretical framework or perspective is articulated (or developed) ...Competing theories are identified and a rationale offered for the choice of the selected theory or why a new theory is being developed..." (Ohio State University, 1999, p. 2; identical language is used at the University of Pennsylvania, 1999, p. 2)

"A theoretical framework or perspective is articulated, its strengths and weaknesses identified, and the choice of theory defended" (Smith College, 1999, p. 2)

"The dissertation is related to an aspect of theory or clinical practice..." (New York University, 1998, p. 50).

"...the dissertation is an educational endeavor in which the student demonstrates the ability to integrate knowledge about social work practice and theory with sound empirical research principles" (Simmons, 1999, p. 5)

"Describe the theoretical framework that you have found most useful for structuring an analysis of this problem (p. 32)...the literature review will discuss in a critical and integrative manner, pertinent theoretical material and empirical research which bear upon the study's hypotheses...." (Barry University, 1999, p. 34)

"At a minimum, the proposal should have:...a statement of the problem including an analytic review of the literature and theory in the area". (Arizona State University, 1999, p. 15)

"What theories were used in the study?" (Rutgers University, p. 38)

"CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: This section should provide a detailed review of the theoretical frame of reference you are using in carrying out this study" (Fordham University, 1999, p. 2)

"An acceptable project is one that utilizes and contributes to theoretical knowledge..." (Institute for Clinical Social Work, 1995, p. 12)

"Within the context of our program, the dissertation should represent an original and independent piece of work contributing to the theory and the knowledge base for social work practice...grounded in and adding to theory or theories relevant to the subject of the study" (University of North Carolina, 1997 pp. 71-72)

These sentiments ignore the fact that many forms of research are not aimed at either developing or testing theories. Some potential examples of such studies are needs assessments, purely descriptive work, epidemiological research, some forms of qualitative inquiry, policy analysis, demographic studies, cross-cultural investigations, meta-analyses, methodological advances, historical studies, empirically-oriented risk assessment studies and predictive investigations, and evaluations of clinical interventions, agency programs, or of community practice. Some forms of qualitative research actively avoid placing a research project into a theoretical framework, for fear that this will bias one's data-gathering and interpretation efforts. Does our profession's emphasis on theory-testing research inadvertently discriminate against selected qualitative research methods?

Based upon our socialization into the research role, and standards imposed by our doctoral programs, students with research interests which do not involve theory development or testing can be actively discouraged from undertaking such pragmatic studies in favor of some type of explanatory research study supposedly predicated on a theory. After all, what student would want to run the risk of conducting an outcome study and have her dissertation committee respond with a bored wave of the hand, dismissing the work as simple "administrative data gathering," and yawningly ask, "So what?"

Often, our academic insistence on foisting the issue of theory testing onto students results in a cursory effort which does justice neither to the theory supposedly being addressed, or to inculcating the student into the truly legitimate relationship between theory and research. An otherwise sound piece of evaluation research may be forced to uneasily rest on a Procrustean bed of theory-testing research, sometimes being distorted beyond recognition. Is this my assertion alone?

Dr. Denise Bronson is the current Director of the Social Work Doctoral Program at Ohio State University, and has been intimately involved preparing their annual National Symposium on Doctoral Research in Social Work. Here is what she has written in a letter to me (quoted with her permission):

> "I've been reviewing the dissertation abstracts that are submitted to the Symposium for five years now and have seen very few that do more than paid lip service to theory. My very subjective impression is that if theory is mentioned at all it seems to be as an add-on rather than as something that is driving the research or defining the question...we talk a lot about integrating theory and doctoral research but that it seldom really happens" (Denise Bronson, personal communication, 9 March 1999).

In the spirit of these contemporary qualitative times, let me provide a few anecdotal examples of this distortion of the research process:

Last year a doctoral student at the University of Georgia chose as her Ph.D. dissertation topic conducting a long term follow-up of adults who as children had lived in a traditional orphanage. She had contacted almost a hundred alumni who were had been raised in this Florida orphanage, having lived there about seven years during their youth, and had a mean age of 54 years old at follow-up. She administered (via a mail survey) standardized measures of life satisfaction and quality of life, and had them respond to a number of other demographic and other questions. This was a most interesting study, particularly since there have been only a handful of similar investigations in America, and given the controversial nature of orphanage care versus foster care and adoption in today's child welfare system.

Come prospectus time her committee forced her to include a review of the literature on some theory related to her topic. No matter that the orphanage was not founded or currently operated according to any particular theory of behavior and development, rather this exercise seemed more like a token genuflection rather than a genuinely useful element in the research enterprise. She accordingly read some literature and completed a cursory literature review of the fields of attachment theory and resiliency theory. These were no doubt tangentially relevant to the subject of her dissertation, but she could have equally plausibly chosen to examine social learning theory, object relations theory, or reactive attachment theory as her theoretical foundations. No matter the empirical underpinnings of the theories she chose--as long as she included some element of the mandated "theory" into her dissertation the committee was satisfied. Of course, immediately after the dissertation defense all the theoretical content had to be deleted, in order to shrink the work down to a journal article-length manuscript. In my opinion, this was a meaningless, indeed harmful, exercise which distorted the legitimate mechanisms of scientific inquiry.

Similarly, another doctoral student, a medical social worker, was working in a pediatric neonatal intensive care unit. Part of her responsibilities included working with mothers who failed to comply with the pediatrician's prescription for regular use of a home infant apnea monitor, once the infants had been discharged home. She used a case management model, and some simple behavioral prompting strategies, to encourage these initially noncompliant mom's to use their infant apnea monitors for the requisite number of hours everyday. She was very much working via practice wisdom, common sense, and some operant principles. This, however, was not sufficient for her dissertation committee, who required her to build into her dissertation's literature review a section on a theory with which she was relatively unfamiliar, that of the "health belief model." Again, the actual outcome study was largely completed. The student certainly did not draw upon the literature of the health belief model in designing her intervention. Nevertheless, this exercise of building <u>some</u> form of theory into the dissertation was seen by the committee as essential. It was not enough that she developed and verified a reliable psychosocial intervention that resolved the problem for the large majority of the referred families. So she dutifully complied with the committee's dictates, read up and regurgitated theoretical

content on the "health belief model," all of which was promptly deleted from the diskette when it came time to prepare the journal article manuscript.

The practical reality is that the design and conduct of outcome studies in the human services without any reliance on a formal theoretical foundation is not uncommon. Omer and Dar (1992) reviewed 252 empirical studies of psychotherapy published in the Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology in the years 1967/1968, 1977-1978, and 1987-1988. They found that during the 1960s, about 69% of the studies had a theoretical rationale; during the 1970s about 30%; and the 1980s about 31%. Thus, less than one third of recent outcome studies on psychotherapy appearing in this prestigious journal were reported to be theoretically grounded.

Is this a surprise, to find that many (if not most) outcome studies published in a leading professional journal are not cast as theory-building exercises? Perhaps it should not be, given that so much of practice itself is not theoretically driven. A large number of studies have examined the actual practices of social workers as they go about their work with clients, and their ability to articulate a theoretical rationale for what they do (e.g., Carew, 1979; Hawkins & Fraser, 1981). In almost every case the link has been shown to be a extremely weak one. Kolevzon and Maykranz (1982) found almost no fit between theoretical orientation and choice of interventions, in their study of 700 social workers. Jayaratne (1978) studied the theoretical orientations of over 1000 social workers and found that most practiced a form of "...technical eclecticism, with little heed being paid to theoretical underpinnings" (p. 621). More recently, Aaron Rosen and his colleagues at Washington University have surveyed practicing social workers" rationales for practice decisions, and continued to find that clearly theoretical reasons were very rarely articulated (Rosen, 1994; Rosen, Proctor, Morrow-Howell, & Staudt, 1995).

In one study of a cohort of social work students in Great Britain, students reported encountering "...qualified social workers who appeared not to acknowledge the importance of a theoretical approach to social work" (Barbour, 1984, p. 558) and anecdotally a number of other social workers have long questioned the integrity of the supposedly link between theory and practice (e.g., Pilalis, 1986; Siporin, 1978; Pemberton, 1981). For example:

> "In practice, the apparent anti-intellectual stance of workers has often been the result of the reliance on ad-hoc theorizing by even the most experienced practitioners. Their actions are guided not so much by formal theory but by a form of intuitive reflection that generates a unique theory in action..."Martinez-Brawley & Mendez-Bonito, 1998, p. 197).

We are not alone. A psychiatrist, Mitchell (1997) recently lamented the lack of attention to child developmental theory which characterized research and practice in the field of

mental retardation, and theory in general seems poorly linked to psychiatric practices (see Mrazek, 1976).

At this point, it is appropriate to clarify what I meant by the term "theory" since it is often misunderstood. Several common definitions are listed in Table 2, below.

Table 2

Some Selected Definitions of "Theory"

> "Theory consists of an interlocking set of hypotheses that are logically related, and it seeks to explain the inter-relations among empirical generalizations" (Tripodi, Fellin, & Meyer, 1969, p. 13)
>
> "A group of related hypotheses, concepts, and constructs, based on facts and observations, that attempts to explain a particular phenomenon" (Barker, 1999, p. 485)
>
> "Theories are sets of concepts and concepts that describe and explain natural phenomena" (Tolson, Reid, & Garvin, 1994, p. 21).

In summary, theories are attempts to retrospectively explain and to prospectively predict. Within social work, we are concerned with theory pertaining to explaining and predicting various aspect of human behavior. Some theories are very comprehensive (e.g., psychoanalytic theory, social learning theory), whereas other are focused on some particular psychosocial problem (the social insularity theory of maternal child abuse; the social exchange model of marital functioning) or developmental phenomenon (e.g., Piaget's theory of cognitive development; Kohlberg's theory of moral development). Some examples of comprehensive theories of human behavior and development include the aforementioned psychoanalytic theory and its derivations (ego psychology, object relations theory, attachment theory, etc.), social learning theory (including respondent, operant, and observational learning), evolutionary biology, humanistic psychology, feminist theory, Marxist theory, and the like. They share the common elements of attempting to capture a wide array of human phenomena, lend themselves to the development of explicit hypotheses which are capable of being tested via scientific inquiry, and from which a number of approaches to social work intervention have been derived.

By theory I am <u>not</u> referring to related terms, such as model, perspective, paradigm, conceptual frameworks or a lens. As illustrated in Table 3, these are distinct constructs (see Table 3, following page).

Table 3

What Theory is Not.

Theories are Not Models

"A theory consists essentially of definitions and propositions: it defines, explains, and predicts but does not direct. In contrast, a model prescribes what the practitioner is to do under given circumstances" (Reid, 1978, p. 12)

"...a practice model, which consists of prescriptive statements or directives about how intervention should be conducted" (Tolson et al., 1994, p. 23, italics in original)

"A model is derived from a theory but it is put together differently...a model is an analog of a theory, built to solve a problem. It has outcomes. It is a problem-solving device, while a theory may be said to be a hypothesis-generating system" (Leob, 1959, p. 4).

"A distinguishing characteristic of TC is that it is not attached to a particular theory of behavior" (Tolson et al., 1994, p. 22)

A Theory is More than a "Perspective"

The ecosystems perspective "...is not a model, with prescriptions for addressing cases; it does not draw from a particular theory of personality; it does not specify treatment outcomes. It is often misunderstood as being a treatment model" (Meyer, 1988, p. 275)

"...the ecosystems idea is a perspective, or a way of looking. It is not a practice model and hence does not tell one what to do. It only directs one's vision towards the complex variables in cases...Once a practitioner has done this, his or her choice of interventions will be guided by the practice theories, knowledge, and values the practitioner has" (Meyer & Mattaini, 1995, p. 19)

The so-called "Systems Approach" is Not a Theory

"Because the ecosystems perspective is not a practice model, it need not be judged for its effectiveness; it is not supposed to do anything (Meyer, 1988, p. 291, italics in original)

Table 3, continued

Theory is Not Philosophical Assumptions

> "Social scientific theory addresses what is, not what should be. Theory should not be confused with philosophy or belief" (Rubin & Babbie, 1997, p. 56)

One's Statistical Assumptions or Methodologies are Not Theory

> "...we should distinguish clearly between sociological theory, which has for its subject matter certain aspects and results of the interaction of men and is, therefore, substantive, and methodology, or the logic of scientific procedure...There is, in short, a clear and decisive difference between knowing how to test a battery of hypotheses and knowing the theory from which to derive hypotheses to be tested." (Merton, 1957, cited in Loeb, 1959, p. 6)

To be sure, one's approaches to scholarly inquiry are undoubtedly guided by certain overarching paradigms and philosophies of science, and we do often make unacknowledged assumptions about the nature and appropriate analysis of one's data. But these issues reside more in the fields of philosophy which themselves undergird behavior science theory, than in the nature of explanatory or predictive theory per se.

It is undisputed that theoretical content is sometimes genuinely and intimately interwoven into the design and conduct of selected human service agency's programs. For example, the Teaching-Family model of caring for adolescents developed at Boys Town, Nebraska, is clearly derived from social learning theory, as are many interventions used to treat sex offenders. At the University of Georgia, Dr. Rufus Larkin recently completed for his dissertation an outcome study of cognitive-behavioral group work with behaviorally disruptive elementary school students, using an randomized delayed-treatment control group design with over 50 children. Both the etiology of the problem and the nature of the treatment were construed in terms of social learning theory, and Dr. Larkin appropriately referenced this literature when writing his dissertation (see Larkin & Thyer, in press). When such linkages legitimately exist, it is essential for the practitioner-researcher to have a thorough and comprehensive familiarity with the theoretical orientations the psychosocial interventions are based upon. But, and this is a serious reservation, in many instances human service agency programs are not based on any particular theory of human behavior, and in such cases it is disservice to make the pretense of such a linkage when it does not naturally exist.

For example, another Georgia graduate, Dr. Betsy Vonk, completed a quasi-experimental delayed treatment control group design to evaluate the outcomes in mental

health symptomatology of over 50 clients receiving services at a university student counseling center. In this instance the counseling center was not oriented towards a particular theoretical model, and the center's many practitioners used many diverse approaches to intervention. Accordingly, Dr.Vonk did not devote much time and effort into reviewing various competing theoretical accounts of the etiology of college student psychosocial problems, nor did she construe her outcome study as a test of any theoretically-driven model of psychotherapy. It was a straightforward, unambiguous, pristine evaluation of the center's services, and of immense value to the administrators running the center (since the outcomes looked very good). Moreover, Dr. Vonk's study turned out to be the most methodologically sophisticated study ever published on the outcomes of college student counseling centers (Vonk & Thyer, in press). It would be a terrible mistake to dismiss a useful (but non-theoretical) outcome study like this as merely "administrative data gathering," or to say "So What?" Indeed, studies such as Dr. Vonk's are precisely what the field needs so desperately.

I believe that there is a legitimate role for the design and conduct of outcome studies on social work practice and in the other human services, studies which are essentially theory-free exercises in evaluation research. If an agency's program, a clinician's intervention, or a public policy is not legitimately grounded in one or more theories of human behavior and development, it makes a mockery of the scientific enterprise to add elements of a theoretical rationale, or to pretend that an evaluation study is a valid test of some theory's hypotheses. In Georgia, for example, we have recently had the experience of establishing a large "boot camp" system for juvenile delinquents. It could be an excellent dissertation research opportunity for a doctoral student to examine criminal recidivism among boot camp alumni, and to perhaps compare their recidivism rate with that of delinquent youth who received other interventions (e.g., probation, community service, and victim confrontation). What is the behavioral or social science theory undergirding our spending millions of dollars on boot camps? None. Our former Governor is an ex-Marine, and he believed on the basis of his personal experience that boot camps could improve the character of delinquent youth. To evaluate boot camps would be a worthwhile idea. To spackle on some thick veneer of theory would be to detract from the scientific beauty of the study, not add to it. To the extent that we would read a study like this, and deprecatingly ask "So what?" or to dismiss such a project as mere "administrative data gathering" is to perpetuate the dominant focus among social work researchers on descriptive and theory-testing studies, and minimize the potentially much more valuable role of evaluation studies.

Of course counter examples could be given. In Atlanta one of the major interventions aimed at reducing wife-battering is an organization called "Men Stopping Violence" (MSV). MSV is clearly and unambiguously derived from various feminist theories about the causes of men beating women, and the structured group work intervention program to which the court mandated clients are required to receive is heavily derived from these feminist theories. An outcome study of the effectiveness of MSV

would legitimately include a comprehensive literature review of the feminist theoretical formulations of spousal battering, a critical appraisal of this literature, and the derivation of one or more predictive hypotheses from feminist theory. Such a study would then legitimately integrate theory-testing with evaluation efforts. There are some problems, however, with embedding the theory-testing agenda with evaluation research exercises. Here are a few of the more conspicuous ones.

Most Etiological Theories are Wrong

It is a sad fact, but most comprehensive theories of human behavior and development, and most mid-range theories focusing upon explaining circumscribed psychosocial problems, are simply wrong. Either we know they are wrong now, or we can be reasonably sure that in the fullness of time they will ultimately be proved to be incorrect. For example, within developmental psychology it is pretty clearly established that Piaget's theory of cognitive development is incorrect, yet this approach continues to be perpetuated by our human behavior in the social environment textbooks. A budding doctoral researcher anticipating a career conducting research in young children would be expected to learn all about Piaget's ideas. Why? Do we ask contemporary astronomy students to learn about astrology? Modern chemists to study alchemy? Yet a recent doctoral graduate from my University had to include Freud's ideas on psychosexual development in her dissertation evaluating outcomes of cognitive-behavioral treatment of sex offenders. Does this make any sense, when we now know that Freud's accounts of the development of sexual paraphilias lack any credible research support at all? No, it was simply done as a tip of the hat to the idealized standards of theory which are supposed to characterize a quality dissertation.

Most Intervention Theories are Wrong

As certain psychosocial interventions develop a fairly credible empirical foundation as being effective, it is quite tempting to conclude that the effectiveness of a treatment implies the validity of the theory undergirding that treatment. Unfortunately, life is not so simple. In the late 1950s and 1960's, when Joseph Wolpe first wrote about systematic desensitization (SD), SD was theorized to work according to a physiological mechanism called reciprocal inhibition (RI). Several generations of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers were taught all about RI theory, in addition to learning the technique itself. By the mid-1970s, research showed that the effectiveness of SD did not reside in the mechanism of RI, and further accounts have been developed to account for the effectiveness of this approach. All that time and effort requiring students to learn the theory supposedly accounting for the effectiveness of SD was a waste.

More recently, Francine Shapiro invented "eye movement desensitization and reprocessing" (EMDR) as a rapid and effective cure for post-traumatic stress and other

conditions. Shapiro developed a very elaborate physiological explanation for why having the client track the therapist's finger as it was waved back and forth in front of the client's eyes was supposed to alleviate anxiety. Tens of thousands of mental health professionals have been trained in EMDR, and a large component of that training has been about the theory of this approach. It has now been convincingly demonstrated that the theory behind EMDR is invalid. I suspect that social work's preoccupation with inventing theoretical accounts to explain the mechanisms of action of psychosocial interventions is in part driven by the myth that possessing a strong foundation in theory is a prerequisite for professional status.

There are now many behavioral and cognitive behavioral interventions which can be used by social workers that enjoy considerable evidence of effectiveness (see Thyer & Wodarski, 1998). Does treatment effectiveness prove the validity of the underlying behavioral or cognitive theories? I think not. The heliocentric theory of the universe worked very well for the ancient Egyptians at predicting eclipses. Its success did not prove the merits of their theory (which we now know to have been wrong). Acupuncture may prove to have some therapeutic benefits, but the success of the treatments has no bearing on the Chinese theory of invisible meridian lines of energy focused on particular parts of the body. Closer to home, behavioral marital therapy (BMT) has been shown to be modestly effective for some types of martial problems, but perversely, the social exchange theory which BMT was based upon is now generally conceded to be wrong.

The Problem of Rival Hypotheses

Another problem is that a favorable outcome for a given intervention, presumptively based upon a particular theory, is likely to be seized upon by advocates of other theories, who can come up with an equally plausible explanation for the effectiveness of the intervention based upon their preferred, alternative, theoretical model. Any given favorable treatment outcome is likely explicable by a number of competing theories. Isolating which alternative theory is the closest to nature's truth is an exceedingly difficult undertaking, and an outcome study can be needlessly complicated by such efforts.

Conversely the failure of interventions has only a tenuous bearing on the invalidity of the theory that the treatment was based upon. If Treatment X fails to help clients, even though Theory Y clearly predicts that it should help them, does that prove Theory Y to be incorrect? Not necessarily. The advocates to Theory Y could assert that the practitioners implementing Treatment X obviously did not do it properly, so that this study was not a fair test of either Treatment or Theory. A further excuse which is sometimes given is to speculate on a post hoc basis that the measurement methods or research design were insufficiently subtle assessment tools to legitimately appraise the undoubtedly positive effects of treatment. For example, saying something like "Yes, symptoms did not remit,

but the patients had greater insight into their problems," even though the treatment was advertised as a method to reduce psychosocial symptomatology.

In general, etiological theories will usually require credible evidence garnered outside the context of evaluation studies in order to be convincingly supported or refuted. At this stage of development in the design and conduct of evaluation studies in social work, we should recognize the value of what Michael Scriven (current President of the American Evaluation Association) has labeled "black box evaluations," outcome studies wherein the mechanism of change remains unknown (Scriven, 1994). Black box evaluations can be contrasted with "gray box evaluations" and "clear box evaluations" (wherein the processes of change are well established). I do not know of a single effective psychosocial intervention applied within social work that has been explained by a theoretical mechanism of action that is well supported by empirical research (i.e., a clear-box evaluation). In my opinion, generating a sufficient number of black box evaluations, demonstrating that an intervention truly is effective, is a logical precursor to designing and conducting gray-box or clear-box studies. In other words, document positive outcomes before becoming preoccupied with process studies.

Almost 30 years ago, Scott Briar offered this account for why social work services in general did not seem to be effective:

> "One possible reason for this unhappy state of affairs is that the explanations offered by the theories are in error, and this interpretation finds some support in the attempts that have been made to test hypotheses derived from some of these theories. More important, we have argued that even if an explanatory theory is valid, it not a sufficient guide for changing behavior, which necessarily involves variables not contained in an explanation of a problem. And in many instances at least, such an explanation is not even necessary in order to correct the problem...the connections between these explanations and the intervention principles that are supposed to follow from them have been speculative, loose, or even nonexistent. Such theories seek to explain how a problem came about, not how it can be changed, that these are quite different, sometimes even independent questions...This state of affairs is bound to continue until theories of intervention are available, that is theories centrally concerned with the question "How can this problem (or behavior) be changed?" Only then will systematic analysis of that question be substituted for speculations and inferences drawn from theories that were never designed to answer it" (Briar & Miller, 1971, p. 224, italics added)

As usual, Dr. Briar made some excellent points. Explanatory and intervention theories are quite different entities. It is a mistake for social work research to focus on explanatory theories in lieu of intervention research. Focus on behavioral change

methods. In the due course, explanatory theories may well emerge from data aggregated about the effectiveness of interventions. Research on social work practice should be inductively derived from client and societal problems, not deductively driven from explanatory theories.

Rather than practice being an exercise in the application of theory, I agree with the view of Pemberton (1981) who wrote an article charmingly titled Efficient practice precedes the theory of it: On the relation between ideas and action in social casework.

> "A better way is to view social work practice...as skilled performance...The social worker need no more go through some deliberative process of theorizing to connect theory to practice than the motorist, to drive properly, has to recite to himself 'red light, I'd better stop'" (Pemberton, 1981, p. 25)

Recommendations

Let us relegate theory to its proper role. It is neither essential nor necessarily desirable for research on social work practice to be theoretically driven. There are many negative consequences for our field's current insistence that dissertations be exercises in theory-building. Rather than mandating that by definition a social work dissertation must be either theoretically based, or contribute to theory, let us recognize the value of nontheoretical research contributions, and not accord them secondary status. Theories attempt to explain. Social work attempts to change.

Frank Turner, one of our discipline's most productive writers about social work theory, recently made this pertinent comment:

> "...in no way is there yet a direct cause and effect relationship between the use of a theory and a particular outcome" (p. 27)...A critical question...is the relationship between theory and practice. At this point in our history it is strongly held and consistently taught that theory and practice are inextricably interrelated. This is believed almost as an article of faith. However when the question is asked about the basis of this strong conviction, we find that the direct evidence is very sparse." (Turner, 1999, p. 29)

There is nothing intrinsic about the scientific research enterprise that mandates the direct advancement of theoretical knowledge. The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 1999, p. 410) simply defines research as "systematic procedures used in seeking facts of principles." Although a definition of science is not provided, there is a listing for scientific method:

> "A set of rigorous procedures used in social and physical research to obtain and interpret facts. The procedures include defining the problem, operationally stating in advance the method for measuring the problem, defining in advance the criteria used to reject hypotheses, using measuring instruments that have validity and reliability, observing and measuring all the cases, or a representative sample of those cases, presenting for public scrutiny the findings and the methods used in accumulating them in such detail as to permit replication, and limiting any conclusions to those elements that are supported by the findings" (Barker, 1999, p. 427)

Note that contrary to the myth and standards promulgated by our textbooks, doctoral programs, and the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, the centrality of theory development is nowhere to be found in these definitions. In fact, the very word "theory" is absent. There is no reason to perpetuate the idea that pragmatic evaluation research efforts, lacking any theoretical grounding, or immediate contribution to theory development, are second-class citizens within the scientific community.

I specifically encourage doctoral programs, as well as the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education, to modify their dissertation standards, incorporating language which indicates that dissertations should be based upon "relevant theory and/or empirical research." This simple change could obviate many of the problems I have discussed in this paper.

Social work faculty should not support the elitism which has long characterized the academy, favoring theoretical research over applied studies. Social work should willingly embrace its primary role as an applied field, whose primary mission is solving psychosocial problems. We are not an academic discipline whose primary charge is the advancement of theoretical knowledge.

Our field's preoccupation with the development of a unique, discipline-specific, theoretical foundation is in large part driven by the assumption that the possession of such knowledge is considered to be a prerequisite for obtaining "professional status," as was claimed by Flexner in 1915. His judgement that social work was not then a profession because it lacked disciplinary-specific knowledge has served as an impetus for much of our rhetoric regarding the important of social work theory. This was a mistake. For a variety of reasons, outlined in another paper (Thyer, 1999), it is logistically impossible for the field of social work to develop a body of unique, disciplinary-specific theoretical knowledge. Our efforts to do so have not yet met with appreciable success, certainly not proportionate to the efforts expended. And it is unlikely that significant advances will be accomplished in this regard in the near future. If nothing else, the growing thrust towards interdisciplinary research will exacerbate the problems involved in attempting to develop theoretical knowledge unique to social work.

However, my recommendation is simply for more balance between theoretical work and evaluation studies, not an abandonment of theory. Most research in our field is aimed at descriptive work or in testing theory--only about 3% consists of well crafted outcome studies on the effectiveness of social work services. I would be satisfied with a 50-50 split! Such efforts would be a step in the direction of solving the crisis (rather than decrying it) so that 20 years from now this episode will be an interesting historical phase in the intellectual maturation of our profession.

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